

**Herald online**

**Thursday 3 October 2024**

### **SQA releases appeal data but History investigation continues**

The SQA has today released the results of exam appeals, The Herald can confirm.

Details of appeal outcomes have been issued to schools and colleges, who can now inform students whether or not they have been successful. The appeals system allowed those unhappy with their grades to request that their exam paper is checked, but did not involve a full remarking of those papers. There was no facility for students to submit additional or alternative evidence as part of a standard appeal.

Full information about appeals, including overall submission levels and success rates, will not be published until December.

However, the SQA has also admitted that an investigation into problems with the marking of Higher History, which was supposed to conclude last week, is still ongoing, leaving students in this subject unsure if their grades are indeed final or could yet be changed as a result of the review being undertaken.

The Herald has asked the SQA if it is able to confirm when the review of Higher History marking will be concluded, but has only been told that information will be provided “as soon as we can”.

In August, The Herald revealed that teachers, including current exam marks, had accused the SQA of ‘moving the goalposts’ and subjecting students to an ‘unfair’ marking process for this year’s Higher History exam.

They explained that more detailed answers had been demanded than has previously been the case, and that no warning of the change had been provided. As a result, the SQA was accused of “moving the goalposts” after the exam had taken place.

Critics argued that this altered approach was behind a 25% drop in pupils’ performance levels in the Scottish History part of the exam, and a thirteen percentage point decline in the overall pass rate.

The SQA had insisted that marking has been “consistent with previous years”, and that the sudden falls in test scores and pass rates was simply down to poorer performance from students. Education secretary Jenny Gilruth initially refused to intervene, but ultimately bowed to pressure and demanded a meeting with SQA leaders.

However, during this meeting, the SQA confirmed that it had u-turned and that an investigation had been launched. No public announcement of this decision had been made.

Concerns have been raised that the investigation lacks credibility and independence as it is being carried out by an SQA official rather than an external expert.

Gavin Yates, Executive Director of national parent group Connect, said:

“It’s imperative for public confidence in the SQA that these matters are resolved as quickly as possible. Being open and transparent with data is key to improving that confidence.

“It is really disappointing that the Higher History issue has not yet been resolved and I’m hopeful that the SQA leadership will agree with me that providing clarity for learners should be their absolute top priority.”

The SQA has been approached for comment.

James McEnaney



## SQA releases exam appeal results but questions over History marking continue

James McEnaney  
03 Oct 2024 18:51:23

The SQA has released the results of 2024 exam appeals, with information having now been issued to schools and colleges.

However, the SQA has also admitted that an investigation into problems with the marking of Higher History is still ongoing - despite students' individual appeals in this subject having now been decided.

The exam board said that this review is being carried out "independently by our Head of Standards", but a Scottish Government spokesperson told The Herald that the work will be "reviewed independently" if this is deemed "necessary".

The appeals system allowed those unhappy with their grades to request that their exam paper is checked, but did not involve a full remarking of those papers, nor was there any facility for students to submit additional or alternative evidence as part of a standard appeal. Full information about results, including national submission levels and success rates, will not be published until December.

Explained: what do the Higher History marking guides tell us? What if the exam appeals system is a sham?

SQA launches investigation into 'unfair' exam marking after weeks of pressure

In August, The Herald revealed that teachers, including current exam marks, had accused the SQA of 'moving the goalposts' and subjecting students to an 'unfair' marking process for this year's Higher History exam.

They explained that more detailed answers had been demanded than has previously been the case, and that no warning of the change had been provided. As a result, the SQA was accused of "moving the goalposts" after the exam had taken place.

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However, during this meeting, the SQA confirmed that it had u-turned and that an investigation had been launched. No public announcement of this decision had been made.

Concerns have been raised that the investigation lacks credibility and independence as it is being carried out by an SQA official rather than an external expert.

The SQA has confirmed that the review, which was due to conclude last week, is still ongoing. The Herald has asked the exam board if it is able to confirm when it will be completed, but has only been told that information will be provided "as soon as we can".

However, concerns have been raised about the fact that History appeals have already been decided: appeal judgments are based on whether the original marker has correctly applied the national marking standard, but it is the detailed application of the marking standard, and the accusation that this had been altered after the exam, that the SQA is currently investigating.

The exam board has previously stated that "action will be taken" if the review uncovers any "issues".

Gavin Yates, Executive Director of national parent group Connect, said: "It's imperative for public confidence in the SQA that these matters are resolved as quickly as possible. Being open and transparent with data is key to improving that confidence.

"It is really disappointing that the Higher History issue has not yet been resolved and I'm hopeful that the SQA leadership will agree with me that providing clarity for learners should be their absolute top priority."

How does Scotland's exam system work? Exam dual-presentation: what is it and why is it happening?

Scottish exam results are not 'back to normal' – they're worse

The SQA initially refused to comment on this story, but did so when The Herald queried how judgments had been made for Higher History marking standards when a review into the application of those standards remains ongoing.

In response, a spokesperson for SQA said: "The review of Higher History is being carried out independently by our Head of Standards. As we have previously said, if any issues are uncovered then action will be taken."

A spokesperson for the Scottish Government said: "This is a matter for the SQA's Head of Standards to take forward - it is essential this work is done thoroughly to ensure the credibility of our qualifications.

"The Cabinet Secretary met with the Chief Examiner and Chair of the SQA and has asked to be updated on progress of the investigation. It is important that SQA has committed to publish the findings of their investigation and, if necessary, ensure it is independently reviewed."

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**Herald online**

**Wednesday 6 November 2024 – further updated on Thursday 7 November 2024**

### **SQA accused of 'whitewash' in Higher History marking review**

Scotland's only exam board says that a report into Higher History marking has found no problems with this year's approach.

The materials, released at 2pm today by the Scottish Qualifications Authority, state that "the marking standard in 2024 did not change and that the marking and grading processes worked as intended."

The SQA press release says that "learners were not disadvantaged and can be confident that the attainment rate for Higher History accurately reflected their performance."

In August, The Herald revealed that teachers, including current exam marks, had accused the SQA of 'moving the goalposts' and subjecting students to an 'unfair' marking process for this year's Higher History exam.

They insisted that more detailed answers had been demanded than has previously been the case, with the SQA therefore accused of "moving the goalposts" after the exam had taken place.

Critics argued that this decision was behind a 25% drop in pupils' performance levels in the Scottish History part of the exam, and a thirteen percentage point decline in the overall pass rate.

The Herald revealed that the SQA had launched an investigations into the concerns on the 20th of September, but the exam board has now revealed that it had in fact commissioned the review on the 11th of September, two days after we revealed that education secretary Jenny Gilruth had requested a meeting with SQA officials.

According to the SQA release, the investigation was "carried out by SQA's Head of Standards with support and oversight from the Director of Policy, Analysis and Standards." It adds that "independent, external scrutiny of the review" was provided by Richard Harry, Executive Director of Qualifications and Assessment at Wales' largest awarding body, the WJEC.

The chair of the SQA board said that she hopes the release of the review will "draw a line under the issue".

Fiona Robertson, Scotland's Chief Examiner, said: "Given the concerns that were raised about Higher History in the weeks after Results Day, it was important to provide reassurance to learners and teachers and to provide confidence in the results and the processes that underpinned them. That's why I commissioned SQA's Head of Standards to undertake a comprehensive, evidence-led review and we asked another awarding body, WJEC, to mark SQA's homework and provide independent assurance that any conclusions reached were evidence-based and valid.

"I acknowledge that the review has taken longer than anticipated but, in the interest of learners, it was important to ensure the review was robust and rigorous. We also had to ensure the external reviewer had sufficient time to analyse, assess and audit the evidence and conclusions. I am very grateful to Richard Harry for the time he has given to provide external scrutiny of the review.

“There are always lessons for us to learn and this report highlights some areas for wider reflection, which I welcome. In particular, we need to improve how we deal with feedback we receive from markers so that they know that their concerns are being listened to and, where necessary, dealt with. We are committed to giving all learners and educators a stronger voice as we transition into Qualifications Scotland.”

However, speaking to The Herald on condition of anonymity, current History teachers – including some who marked exams in 2024 – were scathing about the SQA report, offering comments including:

- “It is a disgrace that they are saying there was no change and no problem!”
- “Absolutely no way!! I know for a fact that markers were writing in their reports that they were surprised by the standard and would have to adjust their teaching.”
- “Like Trump’s victory, even though the history report is as expected, it’s still a gut punch. It makes liars out of all the teachers who were in that room, which is such an unpleasant aftertaste. It makes it hard to move forward. The report gives no redress.”
- “Can’t say I’m shocked. Teachers are ultimately too busy to put up a fuss and the whole thing will be memory holed by schools and staff who can’t afford to dwell on it. As always it’s the pupils that ultimately suffer.”
- “It’s there in black and white that the MI changed from the year prior. What hope is there if SQA team leaders said it had changed and they aren’t believed. Now every teacher of history from N4-AH will be second guessing every bit of advice they give. Maybe the SQA will re-brand their advertising for markers from ‘get the inside track’ to ‘get the inside track (which might also be incorrect)’.”
- “Confused and demoralised sums it up. I no longer have any confidence in H History as a course and as a Faculty Head will need to look in future at coursing our young people away from History into Mods/Geog/Politics so they have a chance of getting the grades they need for uni. Really sad. Those in charge of assessment have effectively destroyed the subject. It was already bad enough with the issues with essay structure for paper 1, the issues with paper 2 now are a death knell for the course.”
- “What an absolute farce. They always knew they would find no fault with themselves, what was the point?”

One teacher contacted The Herald to point out that an acknowledgement of the “change of standard” had been “buried in the report”.

In a section containing “representative marker comments”, several teachers express concerns including “the marking standard was much higher than in previous years” and argued that requiring students to use “a name to get a mark” was “not the same as previous years”.

However, the report suggests that markers may not fully understand the processes involved in grading exam papers, and says that the principal assessor and senior exam team have “wider knowledge.” It also says that the principal assessor – about whom teachers have raised concerns – “felt that the markers’ meeting had run as expected”.

SNP MSP Fergus Ewing, who had previously called for government action over the issue, was also sceptical: “Given the angry and sceptical reaction from the teachers themselves, this report seems to be more of an exercise in self-justification by the SQA than an honest attempt to answer legitimate and serious questions, from children teachers and parents.

“Some children may not get the place in a university courses they sought, as a result of poorer than expected history performance. Surely that’s a serious matter? But not one that seems to concern the SQA.

“If the marks of children were as SQA state so much lower last year , then why was that? Nowhere in the SQA report can I see any explanation offered by them.

“In Scotland the quango is now in charge, and rarely if ever called to book. Their homework always remains unmarked , and errors uncorrected by the red ink of the Ministerial pen.”

Scottish Labour Education spokesperson Pam Duncan-Glancy said “Once again the SQA has shown how disconnected it is from what is happening in our schools.

“After marking its own homework, the SQA has decided to try and blame pupils and teachers for what went wrong here.

“The SNP must take responsibility for the chaos surrounding the SQA and step in to get answers on what happened with this history paper.

“This is a clear reminder that a rebranding exercise is not enough to fix the systemic issues in our education system – the SNP must deliver the change needed before another generation of school children are let down.”

Scottish Conservative shadow education secretary Miles Briggs said: “This ‘nothing to see here’ response from the SQA will do little to satisfy pupils, parents and teachers who have grave concerns over this year’s Higher History exam.

“This apparent whitewash will do little to assuage suspicions that the SQA is marking its own homework and underlines the need for proper reform of this discredited quango, rather than just a superficial name change.”

The SQA was asked to confirm some details of the review, including the number of classroom teachers and exam markers that were interviewed as part of the process.

Their spokesperson said:

“Markers are all teachers and are asked to provide feedback after marking is complete. Over 150 Higher History markers submitted feedback and all of this feedback was considered by the review. In addition, when concerns were first raised about the marking standard, we wrote to every Higher History marker and gave them a further opportunity to provide feedback. While only four took up this further opportunity, this feedback was also considered by the review.

“As the concerns raised were focused on the setting of the standard, follow-up interviews were conducted with those responsible for setting this standard, namely the senior appointees - also teachers - and SQA staff.

“The review provides a balanced summary of the feedback provided by markers, who are all teachers.

“Independent, external scrutiny of the review by an expert in standard-setting and exams has endorsed the findings and confirmed the evidence supports the report’s conclusions.”

James McEnaney

# SQA says that Higher History marking standards did not change

1 hr ago

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By [James McEnaney](#)~~MrMcEnaney~~ Education Reporter

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The exam board has released the results of an investigation into exam marking after teachers and markers raised major concerns (*Image: NQ*)

Scotland's only exam board says that a report into Higher History marking has found no problems with this year's approach.

The materials, released at 2pm today by the Scottish Qualifications Authority, state that "the marking standard in 2024 did not change and that the marking and grading processes worked as intended."

The SQA press release says that "learners were not disadvantaged and can be confident that the attainment rate for Higher History accurately reflected their performance."

In August, The Herald revealed that teachers, including current exam marks, had accused the SQA of '[moving the goalposts](#)' and [subjecting students to an 'unfair' marking process](#) for this year's Higher History exam.

They insisted that more detailed answers had been demanded than has previously been the case, with the SQA therefore accused of "moving the goalposts" after the exam had taken place.

Critics argued that this decision was behind a 25% drop in pupils' performance levels in the Scottish History part of the exam, and a thirteen percentage point decline in the overall pass rate.

The Herald revealed that the SQA had launched an investigations into the concerns on the 20th of September, but the exam board has now revealed that it had in fact commissioned the review on the 11th of September, two days after we revealed that [education](#) secretary Jenny Gilruth had requested a meeting with SQA officials.

According to the SQA release, the investigation was "carried out by SQA's Head of Standards with support and oversight from the Director of Policy, Analysis and Standards." It adds that "independent, external scrutiny of the review" was provided by Richard Harry, Executive Director of Qualifications and Assessment at Wales' largest awarding body, the WJEC.

The chair of the SQA board said that she hopes the release of the review will "draw a line under the issue".

Fiona Robertson, Scotland's Chief Examiner, said:



“Given the concerns that were raised about Higher History in the weeks after Results Day, it was important to provide reassurance to learners and teachers and to provide confidence in the results and the processes that underpinned them. That’s why I commissioned SQA’s Head of Standards to undertake a comprehensive, evidence-led review and we asked another awarding body, WJEC, to mark SQA’s homework and provide independent assurance that any conclusions reached were evidence-based and valid.

“I acknowledge that the review has taken longer than anticipated but, in the interest of learners, it was important to ensure the review was robust and rigorous. We also had to ensure the external reviewer had sufficient time to analyse, assess and audit the evidence and conclusions. I am very grateful to Richard Harry for the time he has given to provide external scrutiny of the review.

“There are always lessons for us to learn and this report highlights some areas for wider reflection, which I welcome. In particular, we need to improve how we deal with feedback we receive from markers so that they know that their concerns are being listened to and, where necessary, dealt with. We are committed to giving all learners and educators a stronger voice as we transition into Qualifications [Scotland](#).”

*More to follow*

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**LETTERS**

It’s good to see schools stand up to the SQA. Now it’s time to make exams history

ON reading your article on the latest soap episode on the SQA (“Higher History marking ‘worked as intended’”, The Herald, November 7), I doubt if anyone really imagined that it would wave a white flag, especially as its days are numbered as an authority.

The issue is in fact one which has probably been constant over the years of its existence, though it is good to see schools standing up for themselves at last. The problem always seems that schools teach with the naked eye and then their students are externally assessed with a microscope.

I suggest that apart from the seeming failure of the SQA to provide sufficient exemplification beforehand on the standards expected that year, the issue is much wider. I expect that the SQA can make any standard it pleases for Higher so long as universities accept that standard. However, they do seem to differentiate between an A pass and a B pass as if the consequences would affect the orbit of the Moon.

If we must insist on exams is it not time for a broader brush approach with just a pass mark and if the universities don’t like it they can make their own arrangements? After all, the exam diet is so intense that young people are not only branded but can be defined as an adult.

**Bill Brown,  
Milngavie.**

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Is it time to  
rethink the  
exams system?  
Picture: Newsquest

Source URL: <http://www.heraldscotland.com/news/24571825.gilruth-asks-meet-sqa-unfair-exam-marking/>



## Gilruth sets SQA meeting as she bows to pressure over 'unfair' exam marking

James McEnaney  
09 Sep 2024 17:26:34

Education Secretary Jenny Gilruth is to request a meeting with senior SQA officials to discuss "concerns" over the marking of Higher History exam papers.

Last month, The Herald revealed that teachers, including current exam marks, had accused the SQA of 'moving the goalposts' and subjecting students to an 'unfair' marking process. They explained that more detailed answers had been demanded than has previously been the case, and that this altered approach was behind a 25 percent drop in pupils' performance levels in the Scottish History part of the exam.

The SQA insisted that marking had been "consistent with previous years". The Scottish Government originally declined to intervene, stating that the exam board would carry out its own review, but has now confirmed that Ms Gilruth will meet with the SQA on 18 September after the release of the 2024 exam papers and marking instructions sparked fresh demands for an investigation.

Teachers have told The Herald that the documents clearly demonstrate "the reality of stricter marking and greater detail required" than had previously been the case for Higher History students.

An extract from the 2023 Higher History marking instructions (Image: The Herald)

An extract from the 2024 Higher History marking instructions (Image: The Herald)

Despite this, a spokesperson for the SQA again insisted that there were "no changes to the marking standards, principles, or instructions for either the assignment or the question papers for the Higher History course in 2024." They argued that the attainment rate for Higher History, which saw pass rates fall by 13 percentage points in a single year, "accurately reflects learners' performance".

"More information and context are always provided in the marking instructions to support markers – clearly this information and context is adapted every year to reflect the changes to the questions.

"All Higher History markers have been given the opportunity to provide further feedback and raise any concerns and we have received only a very small number of responses."

However, this position has been rejected by opposition parties who insist that an external, independent investigation must take place in order to ensure accountability and confidence in the exam system. Teachers have also told The Herald that the culture within the SQA means that many feel they cannot be honest in their feedback without risking reprisals from the exam board.

Scottish Conservative shadow education secretary Liam Kerr MSP said: "It's clearly unjust that there's no transparent mechanism to deal with situations like this, especially when there is such a clear case for investigation.

"The SQA has been mired in one scandal after another since the 2020 marking debacle and the SNP government has promised reform for years.

"Yet nothing at all has happened, other than a proposed name change that looks like a purely cosmetic exercise. We need an examination system that addresses concerns from pupils, teachers and parents directly, openly and fairly. Jenny Gilruth should stop kicking this issue down the road and step in urgently to resolve it."

Teachers hit out at SQA over 'unfair' exam marking

Teachers are blowing the whistle on the SQA – but the government doesn't want to hear

What do the Higher History marking guides tell us?

Education spokesperson Willie Rennie MSP said: "When even SQA markers are saying that the goalposts were moved, then it is time for an outside investigation. Pupils taking life-changing exams should have confidence in the process.

"There has been considerable criticism of SQA decision making in recent years, with the pandemic grading farce only the most prominent example.

"It's why we need proper reform with a new qualifications body which has accountability and is subject to scrutiny. But whilst we await those reforms we need an independent investigation into the situation with Higher History."

Scottish Labour Education spokesperson Pam Duncan Glancy said: "The SNP government cannot ignore the growing concerns around this marking scheme."

"Time and time again the SNP has failed to hold the SQA to account for its failures, ditching meaningful reform in favour of a rebranding exercise."

"The Education Minister must step in and investigate what exactly has gone on here so that pupils and teachers can have confidence in the results."

The Scottish Greens were also approached but refused to comment on the matter.

Following the latest development, The Herald asked the Scottish Government whether or not the Education Secretary would now take action to address the concerns of teachers and MSP.

In response, a spokesperson repeated existing comments, stating that exam marking is "an operational matter for the SQA in its independent role as an examination body" and that the SQA itself "will be undertaking an evaluation of their awarding approaches".

They also pointed to the forthcoming Higher History course report, to be published by the SQA, which "will provide more detail on performance in exams and coursework".

They added: "However, given the concerns raised regarding this subject qualification, the Education Secretary has asked to meet with the Chief Examiner and the Chair of SQA."

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# Anger after SQA does not question markers who voiced exam fears

Only 'senior' appointees quizzed

**Exclusive**  
**James McEnaney**

Education Correspondent

INVESTIGATORS probing problems with Higher History marking did not interview any of the teachers or markers raising concerns, The Herald can reveal.

Despite referring to the work as a "wide-ranging and rigorous review", a spokesman for the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) has confirmed that only "senior appointees" were interviewed.

These individuals, such as the Principal Assessor, have close links to the SQA and were heavily

involved in the events that were the focus of the investigation itself.

Critics say the "astonishing" revelations prove the investigation was, in fact, "a formality" and reveal an organisation "more interested in self-justification" than addressing serious concerns.

The SQA was forced to launch the review after teachers, including current markers, reported the standard for Higher History had been altered after the exam had taken place.

They accused the exam board, and specifically those in charge of History marking, of "moving the goalposts" and subjecting students to an "unfair" process.

Critics argued this change was behind a 25% drop in pupils' performance levels in the Scottish

History part of the exam, and a 13 percentage point decline in the overall pass rate.

The Herald revealed on September 20 that the SQA had launched an investigation into the concerns, but the exam board has now admitted it had, in fact, commissioned the review on September 11, two days after we revealed Education Secretary Jenny Gilruth had requested a meeting with SQA officials.

The investigation was carried out by SQA officials, a move criticised at the time, following a decision by SQA

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chief executive Fiona Robertson.  
The exam board originally advised that the review would be completed before the end of September, but it was ultimately published more than a month late.  
The final report on November 7 states there were no problems with the marking of the Higher History exam and blames students for the poor results this year.  
However, a number of teachers offered scathing responses, including dismissing the conclusions as “a disgrace” and describing the investigation as “a farce”.  
One faculty head said they “no longer have any confidence” in the Higher History course and would look to encourage students to choose alternative subjects for their exams.  
In addition to this, The Herald has now learned that the investigation

Continued on Page 2

# SQA spoke only to ‘senior appointees’

Continued from Page 1

interviewed only people linked to the SQA and that critics of the exam board were not included in the process.

During the review, interviews were held only with “senior appointees” – a reference to the team in charge of the exam and marking processes. Although practising teachers, these individuals have very close links to the SQA, and it was their conduct the exam board had been forced to investigate.

Questions have also been asked about the extent of work to independently verify the SQA’s conclusions, which was carried out by Richard Harry, of the Welsh Joint Education Committee (WJEC).

In a comment included with the original press release, Mr Harry

says he “engaged with the review team on several occasions prior to the publication of the report”.

The Herald asked the WJEC to clarify whether or not Mr Harry met or interacted with anyone who was not a member of SQA staff before endorsing the review conclusions. A spokesman confirmed Mr Harry met only two individuals, both SQA officials.

Scottish Labour Education spokeswoman Pam Duncan-Glancy said the “astonishing revelation” casts more fresh doubt on the finding of the SQA review.

She said: “Teachers have been sounding the alarm on this exam for months, and it beggars belief they weren’t spoken to as part of the investigation. The SQA has completely lost touch with schools, but the SNP government



continues to defend it at every turn.  
“The SNP government must step in to get some answers about this fiasco, and must deliver a genuine change in direction for our education system.”  
Shadow education secretary Miles Briggs MSP said the exam board seems “more interested in self-justification rather than attempting to address the serious concerns of teachers, parents and pupils”.  
He added: “The attempts by this SNP-backed quango to mark their own homework shows a superficial name change simply won’t cut it. The SQA needs systematic reform to ensure students will always be able to achieve the best possible outcomes.”  
SNP MSP Fergus Ewing, who had previously raised concerns

about the independence of the SQA’s investigation, said the publication of the review “only serves further erode confidence in the SQA”.  
He added: “This is just so typical of quangos in Scotland. The people in charge of them always know better and those who do the real work are not even properly asked for their views.”  
“This insidious process has proceeded unchecked and there is no sign it is going to change.”  
A spokesman for the SQA said: “As part of the wide-ranging and rigorous review, interviews were conducted with senior appointees responsible for setting the standard. All of them are practising teachers and not SQA employees.”  
“Everyone who marks for SQA is a teacher. 150 of those teachers

provided feedback after marking the Higher History papers and every piece of that extensive feedback was considered by the review.”  
“The findings and conclusions have been endorsed by an independent expert on exams and standard-setting.”  
In response to concerns that the review interviewed only SQA officials, a Scottish Government spokesman said: “The Scottish Government accepts the findings of the review into the marking of Higher History in 2024 published by the SQA.”  
“It is welcome that SQA has identified areas for improvement from having undertaken this review, including improving how feedback received from markers is considered.”

# Gilruth to demand answers from SQA

**James McEnaney**

EDUCATION Secretary Jenny Gilruth is to request a meeting with senior SQA officials to discuss “concerns” over the marking of Higher History exam papers.

Last month, The Herald revealed that teachers, including current exam marks, had accused the SQA of “moving the goalposts” and subjecting students to an “unfair” marking process.

They explained that more detailed answers had been demanded than has previously been the case, and that this altered approach was behind a 25% drop in pupils’ performance levels in the Scottish History part of the exam.

The SQA insisted that marking had been “consistent with previous years”.

The Scottish Government originally declined to intervene, stating that the exam board would carry out its own review.

But it has now confirmed that Ms Gilruth will meet with the SQA on 18 September after the release of the 2024 exam papers and marking instructions sparked fresh demands for an investigation.

Teachers have told The Herald

that the documents clearly demonstrate “the reality of stricter marking and greater detail required” than had previously been the case for Higher History students.

Despite this, a spokesperson for the SQA again insisted that there were “no changes to the marking standards, principles, or instructions for either the assignment or the question papers for the Higher History course in 2024”.

They argued that the attainment rate for Higher History, which saw pass rates fall by 13 percentage points in a single year, “accurately reflects learners’ performance”.

“More information and context are always provided in the marking instructions to support markers – clearly this information and context is adapted every year to reflect the changes to the questions.

“All Higher History markers have been given the opportunity to provide further feedback and raise any concerns and we have received only a very small number of

responses.” Scottish Conservative shadow education secretary Liam Kerr MSP said: “It’s clearly unjust that there’s no transparent

mechanism to deal with situations like this, especially when there is such a clear case for investigation.

“The SQA has been mired in one scandal after another since the 2020 marking debacle and the SNP government has promised reform for years.

“Yet nothing at all has happened, other than a proposed name change that looks like a purely cosmetic exercise.

“We need an examination system that addresses concerns from pupils, teachers and parents directly, openly and fairly. Jenny Gilruth should stop kicking this issue down the road and step in urgently to resolve it.”

Lib Dem education spokesperson Willie Rennie MSP said: “When even SQA markers are saying that the goalposts were moved, then it is time for an outside investigation. Pupils taking life-changing exams should have confidence in the process.

“It’s why we need proper reform with a new qualifications body which has accountability and is subject to scrutiny. But whilst we await those reforms we need an independent investigation into the situation with Higher History.”

**Client:** SQA Combined Media Coverage  
**Source:** The Herald  
**Date:** 10/09/2024  
**Page:** 6  
**Reach:** 22901  
**Value:** 1858.2700

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A Scottish government spokesperson said the SQA “will be undertaking an evaluation of their awarding approaches”.  
They also pointed to the forthcoming Higher History course report, to be published by the SQA, which “will provide more detail on performance in exams and coursework...However, given the concerns raised regarding this subject qualification, the Education Secretary has asked to meet with the Chief Examiner and the Chair of SQA.”

“  
Jenny Gilruth should  
stop kicking this issue  
down the road

# It will be a happy day when we do away with the SQA monopoly on school certification

I FOUND your article on the Higher History exam fracas refreshing in that it keeps the SQA in the public spotlight (“SQA is ‘undermining young people’s rights’ in exam row”, The Herald, September 12).

I suggest that the conceited SQA has held a monopoly on school certification in Scotland far too long. The annual smoke and mirrors manipulation of marks to ensure the divinity of norm-referenced assessment is appeased, has had its day.

The much-anticipated successor to the SQA must learn that they may have authority conferred on them but will they have the right to risk the mental health of the next generation?

I expect that many people rightly consider examinations are a test within a test. If a pupil works out early on in their schooling the tricks to get marks they will win. Exam technique is a learned art.

In solving the Herald crossword a raw beginner has to study the solutions to determine what the clues meant. It is little wonder that schools often “teach to the test” as SQA final examinations have been allowed to become excessively precious, inflexible in their setting and overwhelming in their albeit transient value.

I consider that if my bank can allow me secure internet access to my account then the new examination authority must allow pupils to access their final examination online, when it suits the school, and with immediate feedback on how to improve. Best of all however

would be to trust in the school-based assessment with a local authority overview.

**Bill Brown,  
Milngavie.**



**Is the current  
exams system  
fundamentally  
flawed?**

Picture: Newsquest

# Minister will meet SQA as anger over history exam rises

BY CALUM PETRIE

Parents of north-east pupils who sat this year's Higher history exam have thrown their weight behind calls for an urgent independent review into how the exam was marked. The backlash comes as it was confirmed that Education Secretary Jenny Gilruth will meet with the SQA next week, after the release of the 2024 exam papers and marking instructions sparked fresh demands for an investigation.

Teachers told The Herald that the documents clearly demonstrate "the reality of stricter marking and greater detail required" than had previously been the case for Higher history pupils.

Speaking to The P&J, one former head of history even compared it to the Post Office scandal.

We spoke to the parent of a pupil at Kemnay Academy last week, Colin Ross, who said discrepancies between his son Kyle's – and many of his classmates' – marks in Part 1 and Part 2 of the

history paper had "raised questions".

Kyle's university future could now be in jeopardy as a result of missing out on an A grade.

Mr Ross said other pupils at Kemnay Academy had been similarly affected, and believed that the problem was "widespread nationally".

Since publishing our article, The P&J has been inundated with correspondence from parents, pupils and even a former head of history – all of whom are convinced that something is amiss.

Mr Ross feels Part 2 of the exam did not reflect the course, and that a greater level of detail was required of answers than pupils had been led to believe.

He added that past papers did not properly reflect Part 2 of the exam either.

"They moved the goalposts," he said.

The pass mark on the Higher history exam dropped nationally by 13.1% compared to 2023, and in the offending Part 2 of the exam, by 25%.

The SQA denied there

was an issue with the marking of the Higher history exam, telling The P&J last week: "The marking instructions for Higher history this year were the same as last year, and we are confident that the attainment rate reflects the performance of learners."

However, that did not wash with P&J readers from across the north-east and Highlands.

One former head of history said: "They (the SQA) have twisted things so much, it's awful.

"I don't know what happens from here.

"The SQA have doubled down on their line – 'it wasn't us, it was the kids' – but I know a few teachers have the bit between their teeth, and now the press are on to it, so you never know."

"It's genuinely dire," he said and even compared it to the Post Office scandal claiming it was a case of: "Protect the brand at all costs."

One parent said: "My daughter has also been affected by the Higher history marking disaster.



“She needed an A for university but was awarded a B. She’s never had a B in this subject before.”

“The SQA are hoping this quietly goes away – look at their parroting of the lower grades simply being ‘a reflection of learners’ knowledge’ and so on.”

“A lot of parents will just accept the script from the SQA and Scottish Government but we must stand up for our young people.”

“Some parents might not know how to raise the issue.”

Ms Gilruth will meet senior SQA officials to discuss concerns over the marking of Higher history exam papers on Wednesday next week.



**MARKING:** Education Secretary Jenny Gilruth met pupils on the day the results were issued. Picture by Steve Brown.

# Swinney may have misled Holyrood on Higher exam controversy

## FM accused after SQA probe answer

**Exclusive**  
**James McEnaney**  
Education Correspondent

JOHN Swinney may have misled MSPs over an investigation into alleged marking problems with the 2024 Higher History exam.

The First Minister claimed that the SQA's work had been "thorough and independent" and that a report on the issue had been "peer reviewed".

However, the body asked to provide an independent review of the investigation has declined to publicly support the methodology used by the Scottish exam board.

Critics now say that Mr Swinney has "questions to answer" and "must come clean" with MSPs.

The SQA was forced to launch the review after teachers, including current markers, reported that the standard for Higher History had been altered after the exam had taken place.

They accused the exam board, and specifically those in charge of History marking, of "moving the goalposts" and subjecting students to an "unfair" process.

Critics argued that this change was behind a 25% drop in pupils' performance levels in the Scottish History part of the exam, and a 13% decline in the overall pass rate.

The review, which was carried out by an SQA official, was eventually published on November 6 – more than a month late.

It found that the exam board had acted properly, and blamed pupils for the drastic drop in attainment rates and performance levels.



**John Swinney is quizzed at FMQs**

However, The Herald quickly revealed that the only people interviewed as part of the investigation had close links to the SQA and were the people whose work was being reviewed.

This led to fresh accusations that the exam board was being allowed to "mark its own homework".

During last week's First Minister's Questions session in the Scottish Parliament, Mr Swinney was challenged on the report by Labour's Pam Duncan-Glancy MSP, who cited The Herald's reporting on the matter.

In response, Mr Swinney backed the SQA, stating that a "a thorough and independent review" had been carried out. He then added that the report had been "peer reviewed" by the Welsh Joint Education Committee (WJEC).

However, when asked about the approach taken during the investigation, including the decision to only interview those with links to Scotland's exam board, a WJEC spokesperson refused to comment.

Continued on Page 4



## Swinney accused of misleading parliament over Higher History exam fiasco

From Page 1

Instead, they advised that their role had only been to ensure that the evidence provided in the report matched the conclusions presented. Questions about the way in which that evidence had been gathered were referred back to the SQA.

Scottish Labour education spokesperson Ms Duncan-Glancy said that Mr Swinney has “questions to answer”. She also referenced the 2020 exam algorithm scandal and warned that the First Minister risks presiding over another “exams fiasco”.

Ms Duncan-Glancy said: “This debacle lays bare all of the failings of the SNP’s qualifications body – they are disconnected from the classroom and are happy to protect their own instead of protecting Scotland’s education system.

“Last week, the First Minister said the review was scrutinised, but this latest revelation leaves him with questions to answer. The First Minister has already presided over an exams fiasco and it is looking increasingly likely that he’s going to preside over another”.

Scottish Conservatives education spokesperson Miles Briggs, who previously described the report as a “whitewash”, insisted that the First Minister must “come clean on his knowledge of the situation engulfing the SQA”.

He added: “Other authorities clearly believe that the SQA has marked its own homework and has

avoided the thorough investigation that should have taken place.

“As a former education secretary, John Swinney must be upfront about what evidence there is to support what he said in Parliament. Otherwise, suspicions will continue to grow about this SNP quango, which is not fit for purpose.”

A spokesperson for the Scottish Parliament said: “Members are responsible for the content of their contributions during parliamentary proceedings.

“The Parliament’s members’ corrections guidance sets out the process around correcting information during proceedings or through corrections added to the official report, including how to seek corrections from another member and publicising where a correction has been added.”

An SQA spokesperson said: “The executive director of qualifications and assessment at WJEC, an expert in standard setting in the context of national examinations, provided independent, external scrutiny and challenge of the review, including the evidence, conclusions and wider reflections.

“We provided Mr Harry [Richard Harry, WJEC executive director of qualifications and assessment] with whatever additional information he asked for to be able to undertake his work and he has publicly acknowledged the review team’s candour and openness to challenge through this process.”

The Scottish Government was approached for comment.

# Labour demands statement from Gilruth over SQA Higher History ‘saga’

## James McEnaney

SCOTTISH Labour has demanded that Education Secretary Jenny Gilruth makes a parliamentary statement over the ongoing controversy around the SQA’s handling of this year’s Higher History exam.

The party’s education spokesperson, Pam Duncan-Glancy, says that the “SNP has covered for the SQA instead of standing up for pupils and teachers”, and called on Ms Gilruth to “provide some much-needed answers on this saga”.

The intervention comes after The Herald reported that First Minister John Swinney may have misled MSPs when defending the SQA during last week’s session of First Minister’s Questions.

Mr Swinney claimed that “a thorough and independent review” had been carried out and added that the report had been “peer reviewed” by the Welsh Joint Education Committee (WJEC).

However, when asked about the approach taken during the investigation, including the decision to only interview those with links to Scotland’s exam board and whose work was ultimately being investigated, a WJEC spokesperson refused to comment on the “methodology” of the review.

Instead, they advised that their role had only been to ensure that the evidence provided in the report matched the conclusions presented.

Questions about the way in which that evidence had been gathered were referred back to the SQA.

The SQA was forced to launch the investigation after teachers, including current markers, reported that the standard for Higher History had been altered after the exam had taken place. They accused the exam board, and specifically those in charge of History marking, of “moving the goalposts” and subjecting students to an “unfair” process.

Critics argued that this change was behind a 25% drop in pupils’ performance levels in the Scottish History part of the exam, and a 13% decline in the overall pass rate.

The review, which was carried out by an SQA official, found that the exam board had acted properly and blamed pupils for the drastic drop in attainment rates and performance levels.

Critics immediately accused the organisation of engaging in a “whitewash”, and teachers who contacted The Herald explicitly rejected the report’s conclusions.

Scottish Labour education spokesperson Ms Duncan-Glancy said: “The SNP has huge questions to answer about the chaos surrounding last year’s Higher History exam and the SQA’s handling of this fiasco. At every turn, the SNP has covered for the SQA instead of standing up for pupils and teachers. In light of these new revelations, the Education Secretary must come before the Parliament and provide some much-needed answers on this saga.”

Responding to our original story, which stated that Mr Swinney may have misled MSPs when defending the SQA report, a Scottish Government spokesperson said: “These claims are totally untrue. “The Scottish Government has accepted the findings of the SQA’s report, including improving how feedback received from markers is considered.”



Education Secretary Jenny Gilruth faces calls for ‘answers’

# Teachers hit out at SQA over ‘unfair’ exam marking in Higher History as pass rate plunges

**Exclusive**  
**James McEnaney**

TEACHERS have accused the SQA of “moving the goalposts” and subjecting students to an “unfair” marking process over this year’s results for Higher History.

Hitting out after the publication of exam results at the beginning of August, they said a different approach to marking some questions is behind a drop in the overall pass rate and a steep drop in performance for individual parts of the exam.

The SQA insists that its marking approach was “consistent with previous years”.

Recent exam results for 2024 show that the overall pass rate for Higher History fell significantly compared to last year. Teachers have expressed particular concerns over the compulsory Scottish History paper, where the average national mark fell from 20.6 in 2023 to 15.2 in 2024 – a drop of more than 25% in a single year.

According to a number of teachers with experience of marking for the SQA, students had to be much more specific when answering questions than has been the case in previous years.

However, teachers themselves had

not been made aware of this change prior to the exam, meaning they had no opportunity to inform students that their answers would require more detail.

In an online post seen by The Herald, one teacher says that the SQA “can’t keep moving the goalposts without telling us”.

Others were critical of the way in which the overall marking process was handled this year, with one saying that their experience was “awful” and another describing being dismissed when raising concerns about the apparently new approach.

Discussing the events that took place this year, one teacher and marker (who spoke to The Herald on condition of anonymity) said: “It was a s\*\*t show.”

“New principal assessor and marking team. The standard seems to be all over the place.”

On the decision to require more detailed and specific responses from students, they added: “They were looking for so much information for one mark.”

“One of the examples had five different bits of info to get the one mark.”

An individual who has held senior positions with the SQA said the steep fall in average scores and pass rates “is

honestly criminal”. They argued it is “very clear that there has been a big change in the standard required this year, especially in the Scottish paper”.

The SQA has already faced criticism for its handling of 2024 exam results after overall pass rates fell while attainment gaps rose to record levels.

On results day, an IT failure also meant that thousands of students initially received results emails that were blank.

Despite the criticism from teachers, including current markers, a spokesperson for the SQA dismissed concerns, claiming that the approach in 2024 was “consistent with previous years”.

They added: “At Higher level, knowledge points are expected to be detailed and used in response to the question.”

Asked if action had been taken once the SQA realised that scores were much

lower than previous years, the spokesperson said that they had used “well-established procedures and considered the impact of return to full course assessment”.

They also said that grade boundaries were “adjusted accordingly”, but SQA data shows the organisation increased the passing score for Higher History from 38% in 2023 to 53% in 2024.

**Client:** SQA Combined Media Coverage  
**Source:** The Herald  
**Date:** 21/08/2024  
**Page:** 10  
**Reach:** 22901  
**Value:** 2070.4600

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Some markers have said they would have raised their concerns publicly, but are concerned that the SQA would punish them for doing so.  
In response to this point, their spokesperson said: "SQA has a range of appropriate channels available for markers to provide feedback while respecting the confidentiality of their contracts with SQA.  
"We welcome and value their feedback."

“ They were looking for so much information for one mark

**Client:** SQA Combined Media Coverage  
**Source:** The Herald  
**Date:** 21/09/2024  
**Page:** 1  
**Reach:** 0  
**Value:** 3124.9800

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# SQA launches investigation into 'unfair' exam marking

Ministers bow to pressure but fears voiced at authority checking 'own homework'

## Exclusive

### James McEnaney

AN investigation is to be launched by the Scottish exam board into concerns of "unfair" marking of Highers.

However, The Herald can reveal the review is being carried out by the organisation's own head of standards, despite calls for any probe to be independent of the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA).

Opposition parties have warned the SQA lacks credibility to carry out the review itself, highlighting a "string of scandals" that have engulfed it in recent years and arguing it should not be allowed to "mark its own homework".

Last month, The Herald revealed that teachers and exam markers had accused the SQA of "moving the goalposts" and subjecting students to an "unfair" marking process for this year's Higher History exam.

They explained that more detailed answers were expected than had previously been the case but that no warning of the change had been provided.

As a result, the SQA was accused of "moving the goalposts" after the exam had taken place.

Critics argued that this altered approach was behind a 25% drop in pupils' performance levels in the Scottish History part of the exam, and a 13 percentage point decline in the overall pass rate.

The SQA initially insisted marking has been "consistent

with previous years", and that the sudden falls in test scores and pass rates was simply down to poorer performance from students, but the board has now accepted "concerns raised" by teachers, pupils and opposition politicians.

The Children and Young People's Commissioner for Scotland and the Scottish Youth Parliament also intervened, accusing the exam board of undermining the rights of students.

The Scottish Government originally declined to intervene but, ultimately, bowed to pressure on the issue.

Education Secretary Jenny Gilruth met the exam board's chairwoman and chief examiner yesterday via a video call, during which details of the investigation were revealed.

MSP Willie Rennie, the Scottish Liberal Democrats' education spokesman, said: "I'm apprehensive about this being an SQA internal investigation.

"This is a body that failed to push back on the Scottish Government's plans to downgrade exam results during the Covid crisis and whose commitment to governance reform looks shaky at best.

"An independent investigation would help to deliver clarity about what has transpired.

"As well as ensuring Higher History pupils are fairly treated, we also need proper reform with a new, accountable qualifications body."

Scottish Conservative shadow education secretary Liam Kerr

MSP said: "After repeated denials that a problem existed, the SQA now say they are conducting a review.

"Unfortunately, the SQA's poor record on transparency, and the string of scandals that have beset

Continued on Page 4



There are concerns over marking



**Client:** SQA Combined Media Coverage  
**Source:** The Herald  
**Date:** 21/09/2024  
**Page:** 1  
**Reach:** 0  
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## SQA looks into exam marking for history

Continued from P1

them since the marking debacle in 2020, will give pupils, parents and teachers little reason for confidence.

"We've been promised change for years yet. As the Education Secretary's statement this week demonstrated, the SNP have done nothing but repeatedly kick the can down the road.

"There must be a clear and accountable mechanism for such cases that allows for proper scrutiny and a thorough overhaul of the qualification and assessment system, not merely a cosmetic fix."

Scottish Labour education spokeswoman Pam Duncan-Glancy said: "The SQA shouldn't be able to mark their own homework. Pupils, teachers and parents deserve to know that this is being taken seriously and that their concerns have been properly listened to and acted on.

"The Cabinet Secretary must satisfy herself and others that the review is independent and fair. Given the track record of the SQA it is questionable as to whether an internal investigation meets that test. Trust in the SQA is at an all-time low and the government's supposed reforms are nothing more than a rebrand."

A spokesperson for the SQA confirmed that officials had met with Jenny Gilruth "and informed her that, in light of concerns raised about the marking of Higher History this year, a review is under way".

"The review is being carried out by SQA's head of standards, who has had no involvement in the marking of Higher History and is expected to conclude next week. The findings will be published to allow full scrutiny and, if any issues are uncovered, then action will be taken."

The government confirmed that the meeting had taken place but referred The Herald back to the SQA for details of the discussion.

# Action call over SQA handling of Higher History exam marks

MSP Ewing demands government intervention over claims of ‘unfair’ process

**Exclusive**  
**James McEnaney**

Education Correspondent

AN SNP MSP has called on the Scottish Government to intervene over the SQA’s handling of Higher History marking, The Herald can reveal.

Fergus Ewing MSP has written to the exam board’s chief executive, Fiona Robertson, raising concerns about the organisation’s decision to launch an “internal investigation” rather than commission a review by someone “entirely independent”.

In August, The Herald revealed that teachers had accused the SQA of “moving the goalposts” and subjecting students to an “unfair” marking process for this year’s Higher History exam.

They explained that more detailed answers had been demanded than has previously been the case, and that no warning of the change had been provided. As a result, the SQA was accused of “moving the goalposts” after the exam had taken place.

Critics argued that this altered approach was behind a 25% drop in pupils’ performance levels in the Scottish History part of the exam, and a 13% point decline in the overall pass rate.

The SQA had insisted that marking has been “consistent with previous years”, and that the sudden falls in test scores and pass rates was simply down to poorer performance from students. Education Secretary Jenny Gilruth initially refused to intervene, but ultimately bowed to pressure and demanded a meeting

with SQA leaders.

However, during this meeting, the SQA confirmed that it had U-turned and that an investigation had been launched. No public announcement of this decision had been made.

In his letter to the SQA, Mr Ewing highlights The Herald’s reporting of problems with the marking of Higher History. He notes that organisation “initially denied any problems” only to later open an investigation, but then points out that “this inquiry is being conducted internally by the SQA”.

Mr Ewing goes on to argue that “the notion of ‘marking one’s own homework’ is not conducive to an impartial investigation”.

He has asked the SQA to “provide a detailed explanation of the events in question, outline the response to the criticisms raised, and clarify whether the SQA would consider replacing the current internal inquiry with an independent one”.

Speaking exclusively to The Herald, the veteran MSP said: “Given the serious allegations, revealed by The Herald, and the need for accuracy and fairness and reliability of the award of grades for pupils taking exams, it is utterly wrong that SQA are having an internal investigation into such serious criticisms.

“This investigation should be carried out by someone who is entirely independent of the SQA and indeed the Scottish Government. No-one can or should ‘mark their own homework’. It breaches the first principles of natural justice that ‘No-one can be a judge in their own cause’. If any public body should know that – it is surely the SQA!

“If they are determined to continue with this inherently and fatally flawed process, I will then urge the Cabinet Secretary for Education to overrule them. In law she has a power to regulate their procedure, and thus to order that this matter be investigated anew and entirely independently of the SQA or indeed the Scottish Government.”

A spokesperson for the SQA said: “The review of Higher History is ongoing and is being carried out independently by the SQA’s Head of Standards. This is a substantial piece of work.

“The findings will be subjected to independent external review and the final report will be published.”

A spokesperson for the Scottish Government said: “This is an operational matter for the SQA. The Cabinet Secretary met with the Chief Examiner and Chair of the SQA on October 7 and has asked to be updated on the outcome.”



Veteran MSP Fergus Ewing

# Higher history marking review must be ‘thorough and transparent’

The way the Higher history exam was marked this year is to be scrutinised after the pass rate dropped by over 10 percentage points

**23rd September 2024, 3:05pm**

**[Emma Seith](#)**

It is “crucial” that teachers and families have “confidence in the marking of all exams”, the EIS teaching union has said after an inquiry was launched into concerns around this year’s Higher history exam.

The concerns - first flagged by *Tes Scotland* on 13 August - were raised after just 65.7 per cent of students sitting Higher history this year attained an A-C grade, a drop of 13.1 percentage points on 2023.

Now, following a meeting last week with education secretary Jenny Gilruth about the drop, the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) says a review is underway of the way Higher history exam papers were marked this year.

It is being carried out by SQA’s head of standards, malpractice and complaints, Margot McKerrell, who the body says had no involvement in the marking of Higher history.

Quick turnaround for Higher history review

The review is expected to conclude this week, with the findings published “to allow full scrutiny”. The SQA says if any issues are uncovered “then action will be taken”.

The EIS, Scotland’s biggest teaching union, has said it is in discussion with its members over concerns about the marking of the Higher history papers this year.

A spokesperson said: “It is crucial that learners, parents and teachers have confidence in the marking of all exams and that valid concerns are investigated by the SQA in a thorough and transparent way. We look forward to the outcome of the SQA investigation before considering next steps.”

- **Background:** [Sharp drop in Higher history exam pass rate](#)
- **News:** [Plan to scrap S4 exams rejected](#)
- **Related:** [SQA grade boundaries - Higher pass marks by subject](#)

When *Tes Scotland* raised concerns about the pass rate with the SQA in August, it said there was “no change to the approach or standard of the Higher history question papers”, but that there was “a drop in learners’ performance in the question papers”.

However, SQA markers and teachers dispute this. Concerns centre around paper two, which focuses on Scottish history; they say there were changes made to the marking standards this year, with students required to give more detail than in previous years in order to gain full marks.



On average, students sitting paper two in 2024 picked up less than half the available marks (15.2 points out of 36); last year, on average, students got 57.2 per cent for paper two (20.6 points out of 36).

‘They keep moving the goalposts’

One teacher commented in an online forum: “They keep moving the goalposts without telling us.”

Another said: “How can we do the best for our kids (who trust us to get it right for them) when we are not party to crucial info? So unfair on them and us.”

The Higher history grade-boundary decision record - released to *Tes Scotland* via a freedom of information request - shows that, while question paper one (on British, European and world history) and the assignment “functioned as intended”, question paper two (on Scottish history) was deemed “more demanding”.

The grade-boundary decision record says: “The content sampled made this component more demanding than intended.”

It concludes: “The overall demand of the course assessment was higher than intended so all grade boundaries were set lower than intended.”

In 2024, the grade boundary for attaining a C grade for Higher history was 48.2 per cent, which is lower than the notional grade boundary of 50 per cent for a C grade - but far higher than the 34.5 per cent required to attain a C in 2023.

# 'The SQA caused a national scandal and must take responsibility'

2 hrs ago

[SQA](#)

[SQA Results](#)

[Education](#)

[Exclusive by James McEnaney](#)[MrMcEnaney](#) Education Reporter

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"Colleagues are already hearing of the damaging impact this is having on future subject uptake, when compared to other social subject choices."

**After months of controversy over Higher History marking, and an SQA-led review that blamed pupils for collapsing performance levels, an experienced teacher has written exclusively for The Herald about a series of events that they call "a national scandal".**

I have been associated with the SQA for a long time – well over 10 years. In that time, I have marked at all levels – Standard Grade, old Higher, New Higher and Advanced Higher.

Let me be clear – I love teaching History in [Scotland](#). I have always enjoyed working with, and for, the SQA History team. I take great pride in the fact that I know my subject well and I am very clear about how to maximise the attainment of pupils in SQA exams.

I have always been a defender of the SQA in relation to national marking standards – they have always been clear and, generally, well communicated. Working as an appointee has afforded me excellent opportunities to develop my professional knowledge as well as network effectively with colleagues across the country.

However, what we have recently experienced with the SQA has been nothing short of a national scandal and one which has made me, and numerous other colleagues, very angry.

That said, I have not been surprised that some of these colleagues (who are, notable, also SQA appointees) have clearly felt uncomfortable speaking out on the issue. They know fine well the consequences and impact on their future appointee roles of doing so. This concern also extends to the leaders and committee members of our professional association, the Scottish Association of Teachers of History, who have been entirely silent on the issue which has engulfed the profession.

The original SQA response to growing concerns about Higher History results in August was to deny there was anything untoward. Their initial reaction to press and social media reports were to affirm that all was well with marking standards.

Eventually however, Fiona Robertson, the SQA's Chief Examiner, was forced to concede that *'it was important to provide reassurance to learners and teachers and to provide confidence in the results and the processes that underpinned them.'*

The hypocrisy of this statement is galling – the SQA were only forced into this position after political pressure was applied to the [Education](#) Secretary in parliament and the resultant report was commissioned.

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## READ MORE

- [Why exam results mean 'alarm bells should be ringing'](#)
  - [Gilruth sets SQA meeting as she bows to pressure over 'unfair' exam marking](#)
  - [Explained: what do the Higher History marking guides tell us?](#)
- 

Whilst the SQA originally stated the report was to be published in the next week, History teachers, lecturers and most importantly learners were left waiting weeks for a report that leaves more questions unanswered.

What is now clear, as can be seen buried in the full report, was that markers did raise concerns, with statements including:

- “the marking standard was much higher than previous years”
- “the standard appeared to be much stricter this year for certain topics i.e. the explain question for Migration and Empire”
- “The marking was so harsh this year, particularly the explain question – it felt like the goal posts were moved after the exam”

Taking these comments alongside the dramatic reduction in attainment in the Higher History 2024 cohort, it begs the question why the grade boundaries were not amended to reflect this reduction.

It appears the SQA were quite content to blame learners for the fact that just 65.7 per cent of students sitting Higher history this year attained an A-C grade – which is a fall of 13.1 percentage points on the previous year.

So, where are we now?

Developments in the SQA History team, and indeed communication with the profession, seem to have ground to a halt.

History teachers in Scotland are currently being disadvantaged by having no 2024 Course Report published, reports which are shared “*with the intention of giving an insight of how learners performed during the exams. They are also supposed to “contain advice for teachers, lecturers, and training practitioners on preparing learners for the coming year’s assessments, as well as statistical data relating to grade boundaries.”*

Similarly, there are no confirmed Understanding Standards events for Higher History.

Given the fact that most schools will soon be approaching S5/6 prelims, how might the SQA suggest that conscientious teachers, who are desperately keen to get it right this year, go about marking these to the required national marking standards?

How might the SQA suggest that experienced teachers go about coaching students, NQTs and less experienced practitioners in Higher History?

Our answer may be found in the most recent Understanding Standards event for National 5 History: when a question was asked about when a similar event might be held for Higher History, the chat function was immediately turned off.

History teachers are also awaiting the 2024/25 approved list of Advanced Higher dissertation titles to be published. Given that learners at this level cannot pick their own question, how does the SQA suggest that these learners make a start on their dissertation this session, without an approved title?

One would hope that the SQA were not intending on leaving it until January to publish the list, with the deadline for submission that term.

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## READ MORE

- [SQA accused of 'whitewash' in Higher History marking review](#)
- [Swinney has 'questions to answer' over SQA review of Higher History exam marking](#)
- ['The public deserve clarity' - SNP slammed for refusing statement on SQA 'fiasco'](#)

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All of the above is to say nothing regarding the impact this has on current learners and indeed their teachers.

Without a useful course report, or any Understanding Standards events, we are left in the dark as to how to improve this session and ensure that another cohort is not left disadvantaged.

Colleagues are already hearing of the damaging impact this is having on future subject uptake, when compared to other social subject choices. This utter lack of clarity by the SQA is also at a time of increased pressure on teachers to close the poverty related attainment gap.

Attainment reviews will have been held up and down the country in Head Teachers' offices with staff being held accountable for results they neither understand nor can explain.

The SQA desperately needs to take some responsibility for this crisis that we are currently facing and show some leadership by having an open, honest and frank discussion with the profession about where we go from here.

Our learners are dependent on it.

# SQA admits 'fully independent review' of exam marking never an option

4 hrs ago

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[Exclusive by James McEnaney](#)[MrMcEnaney](#) Education Reporter

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The SQA launched an investigation after widespread concerns about the marking of Higher History papers, but critics say the exam board has been 'marking its own homework' (*Image: NQ*)

The Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) has been forced to admit that it did not consider establishing a fully independent review of Higher History marking, as it emerged that the Scottish Government has sought the views of history teachers on the report produced by the exam board.

The Scottish Association of the Teachers of History (SATH) has been asked to provide a response to the review, and has opened an online survey to gather members' responses. The Scottish Government had previously said that it accepted the findings of the review and defended the report methodology.

Critics said that the revelations "speak volumes" about the SQA, accused it of showing "contempt for pupils, parents and schools", and again described proposed reforms to the organisation as

Information on the origins of the Higher History review, which blamed pupils for a major drop in pass rates and test scores, was obtained via Freedom of Information requests to the SQA.

The SQA had originally been asked to answer the following questions about the review into Higher History marking:

- On what date was the decision made to initiate the review?
- Who decided to initiate the review?
- On what date was the review actually commenced?
- Who decided that the review should be led by the SQA head of standards?
- Was consideration given to a fully independent review that would not be carried out by a member of SQA staff?

The Herald received direct answers to the first four of these questions, confirming that it was SQA chief executive Fiona Robertson who decided both to launch the review and to have it

carried out by a member of SQA staff. She decided that a review should take place on 10 September 2024, with the work commencing the following day.

However, in response to the final question, the SQA stated: “It was decided that the SQA review would be subject to independent review and this was done by the Director of Qualifications and Assessment at WJEC.”

As a result, The Herald demanded a review of the response, pointing out that the SQA had not answered the question asked.

The SQA issued a new response on 27 November 2024 which accepted the failure to properly respond to our original request and offered an apology. It also confirmed that “consideration was not given to undertaking a fully independent review”, adding:

“Our response to this specific question is therefore ‘No’.”

In a recent comment in response to our reporting, a spokesperson said that the Scottish Government “accepts the findings of the review into the marking of Higher History this year published by the SQA.”

John Swinney also claimed, during a session of First Ministers’ Questions, that “what has been undertaken is a thorough and independent review of the concerns, which has been peer reviewed by another awarding body,” despite the fact that the review’s methodology had not be considered as part of the ‘peer review’ process.

However, it has now emerged that the government – [which was in possession of a draft copy of the SQA report a week before it was published](#) – has now asked for the views of history teachers via their professional association, SATH.

An online survey has been opened which asks teachers a range of questions, including a request to share their thoughts on the findings of the SQA investigation.

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Miles Briggs, [education](#) spokesperson for the Scottish Conservative, said: “The shambolic response from the SQA and its subsequent lack of transparency are totally unacceptable.

“It shows contempt for pupils, parents and schools, but it also indicates that the so-called reform over which the SNP dithered for years has been no more than a shallow rebranding exercise.

“There’s been little or no change in its powers or the people in charge. Ministers must finally makes sure that Scotland’s supervising body on exams does not continue to mark its own homework, brush aside its mistakes and dismiss calls for proper accountability.”

Commenting for Scottish Labour, education spokesperson Pam Duncan-Glancy said: “The questions just keep mounting for both the SQA and the SNP government over this debacle.

“It speaks volumes about the SQA’s approach that no-one even thought about ensuring this review was truly independent.

“The SNP’s decision to fully back this report in public is looking more and more dubious by the day – they must listen to the feedback they get from teachers and start holding the SQA to account.

“It’s clear the SNP’s plans to rebrand the SQA instead of genuinely reforming it aren’t good enough, and if they’d acted long ago as they were told to, they might have avoided this mess. We need a genuine change in direction to deliver an education system pupils and teachers alike can have faith in.”

The SQA was asked why its chief executive did not even consider a fully independent review, and why the organisation had failed to answer this question in its initial response. The exam board was also asked if it would take any further action if the survey of history teachers finds that they reject the review’s findings.

In response, an SQA spokesperson said: “The Higher History review was carried out independently by SQA’s Head of Standards, and SQA’s Director of Policy, Analysis and Standards.

“The Executive Director of Qualifications and Assessment at WJEC, an expert in standard setting in the context of national examinations, then provided independent, external scrutiny and challenge of the review.”

The Herald approached the Scottish Government to ask if it had been aware that a fully independent review had never been considered by the SQA. We also asked if the government still “accepts the findings of the review”, given its decision to seek the views of history teachers, and why those views were not sought before the First Minister defended the review in parliament.

The Herald also sought confirmation of the action the government would take if history teachers are found to have rejected the conclusions presented by the SQA.

A spokesperson for the Scottish Government said: “As stated, the Scottish Government accepts the findings of the review. It is a matter of public record that Richard Harry, Executive Director of Qualifications and Assessment at Welsh Joint Education Committee (WJEC), independently peer reviewed SQA’s report.

“The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills asked officials to contact SATH as the organisation was mentioned in a specific piece of Ministerial correspondence relating to Higher History. It is standard practice for officials to engage with subject associations like the SATH who are important stakeholders.

“The detail of the methodology of the review and scope of independent peer review were operational decisions for the SQA. Marking of exams, and quality assurance of the associated processes, are operational matters for the SQA in its independent role as an examination body.”

Source URL: <http://www.heraldscotland.com/news/24761903.sqa-hauled-holyrood-committee-amid-higher-history-saga/>



## Gilruth and SQA hauled before Holyrood's education committee amid Higher History saga

Rebecca McCurdy  
30 Nov 2024 05:00:00

The Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) and Education Secretary Jenny Gilruth are being hauled before a Holyrood committee amid growing concerns over Higher History marking.

Scotland's only exam board admitted on Friday it did not consider establishing an independent review of the marking process.

Now Douglas Ross, committee convener of Holyrood's education committee, has confirmed SQA chief executive Fiona Robertson and Ms Gilruth will be grilled on the saga on Wednesday morning.

The SQA was forced to launch the review after teachers and current markers reported the standard for Higher History had been altered after the exam had taken place.

Concerns were raised about the marking standard after a large drop in the number of students achieving grades A to C.

In August, it emerged the number of pupils who passed Higher History with top grades fell 13 percentage points, while marks in the Scottish history paper dropped 25%.

A review, conducted by an SQA official, found the exam board had acted properly and blamed pupils for the drastic drop in attainment rates and performance levels.

SQA admits 'fully independent review' of exam marking never an option

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What do the Higher History marking guides tell us?

It said feedback from markers, who are also current teachers, "overwhelmingly focused on the poor standards of responses provided by learners".

Teachers told The Herald they explicitly rejected the conclusions of the review. The Scottish Government previously said it accepted the findings of the report.

But Mr Ross, a former leader of the Scottish Tories, told The Herald: "Many concerns have been raised about this year's Higher History exam and questions remain despite the review undertaken by the SQA.

"Committee members are determined to get the answers students and teachers deserve on this issue.

"The concerns highlighted in the summer continue to be raised, and some of the teachers who have spoken with The Herald are clear that further answers are needed on this issue.

Education Secretary Jenny Gilruth (Image: Scottish Parliament TV) "That is why the Education, Children and Young People's Committee have called the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, along with the Chief Executive of the SQA, to appear before members next week so we can comprehensively question them on this important subject."

A Scottish Government spokesperson previously said it "accepts the findings of the review" published by the SQA.

However, on Friday, The Herald revealed the exams body accepted it did not consider an independent review.

It has since been revealed the Scottish Government has asked the Scottish Association of the Teachers of History (SATH) to gather the views of its members.

An online survey has been opened to ask history teachers a range of questions, including a request to share their thoughts on the findings of the SQA investigation.

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SQA investigation only interviewed those with links to exam board

SQA accused of 'whitewash' in Higher History marking review



An SQA spokesperson said: The Higher History review was carried out independently by SQA's Head of Standards, and SQA's Director of Policy, Analysis and Standards.

"The Executive Director of Qualifications and Assessment at WJEC, an expert in standard setting in the context of national examinations, then provided independent, external scrutiny and challenge of the review."

The Scottish Government was also asked if it still accepted the findings of the review.

A spokesperson told The Herald: "As stated, the Scottish Government accepts the findings of the review. It is a matter of public record that Richard Harry, Executive Director of Qualifications and Assessment at Welsh Joint Education Committee (WJEC), independently peer reviewed SQA's report.

"The Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills asked officials to contact SATH as the organisation was mentioned in a specific piece of Ministerial correspondence relating to Higher History. It is standard practice for officials to engage with subject associations like the SATH who are important stakeholders.

"The detail of the methodology of the review and scope of independent peer review were operational decisions for the SQA. Marking of exams, and quality assurance of the associated processes, are operational matters for the SQA in its independent role as an examination body."

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The SQA and Education Secretary Jenny Gilruth will be grilled by Holyroods education committee. (Image: PA)

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# SQA looks into exam marking for history

Continued from P1

them since the marking debacle in 2020, will give pupils, parents and teachers little reason for confidence.

"We've been promised change for years yet. As the Education Secretary's statement this week demonstrated, the SNP have done nothing but repeatedly kick the can down the road.

"There must be a clear and accountable mechanism for such cases that allows for proper scrutiny and a thorough overhaul of the qualification and assessment system, not merely a cosmetic fix."

Scottish Labour education spokeswoman Pam Duncan-Glancy said: "The SQA shouldn't be able to mark their own homework. Pupils, teachers and parents deserve to know that this is being taken seriously and that their concerns have been properly listened to and acted on.

"The Cabinet Secretary must satisfy herself and others that the review is independent and fair. Given the track record of the SQA it is questionable as to whether an internal investigation meets that test. Trust in the SQA is at an all-time low and the government's supposed reforms are nothing more than a rebrand."

A spokesperson for the SQA confirmed that officials had met with Jenny Gilruth "and informed her that, in light of concerns raised about the marking of Higher History this year, a review is under way".

"The review is being carried out by SQA's head of standards, who has had no involvement in the marking of Higher History and is expected to conclude next week. The findings will be published to allow full scrutiny and, if any issues are uncovered, then action will be taken."

The government confirmed that the meeting had taken place but referred The Herald back to the SQA for details of the discussion.

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A SECURITY of "penalties" for some offenders after they have prison, a Home suggested.

Jess Phillips has had "robust" Serco, which of Justice's (M) May this year.

It comes as prisoners were their sentence phase of the government overcrowd

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